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ABSTRACT

The current practice of including all students with special needs in the general education setting has resulted in new roles for special educators. To determine whether special education professionals are being prepared adequately for these new roles, a study investigated the self-reported competencies of special educators on a set of 35 skills important to special educators working in a leadership role. Analysis of surveys returned by special educators from Nebraska, Tennessee, Kansas, and Texas revealed four groups of competencies. Group 1 dealt with developing budgets and procuring funding, two competencies not usually part of preservice preparation of special educators. This group contained the lowest scores. Group 2 contained 14 competencies indicative of recent changes impacting special educators such as using technology, creating professional development programs for colleagues, and implementing a variety of administrative procedures and initiatives. This group had the second lowest ratings. Group 3 represented a mixture of roles on a continuum from traditional to transitional. Skills such as assessing students with disabilities and developing instructional programs appropriate to the needs of the students were on the traditional end. Transitional skills included collaborating with administrators, teachers, and families and advocating for students. Group 3 had the second highest ratings. Group 4 contained 7 traditional roles and received the highest scores. The findings suggest that teacher education and staff development programs should emphasize skills related to newer and more transitional competency areas. (Contains a table of respondents' ratings of competencies and 16 references.) (TD)

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SPECIAL EDUCATORS' ABILITY TO FUNCTION AS LEADERS IN INCLUSIONARY SETTINGS

The current practice to include all students with special needs in the general education setting has generated anxiety among both special and general educators (Reganick, 1993). Both groups of educators are concerned about the effects of inclusion upon the educational efficacy of the general education classroom, as well as their own abilities to meet the new demands that inclusion places upon them (Wigle & Wilcox, 1997). Neither group of educators are certain of the merits or expectations of including students with disabilities in general education classrooms (W. Stainback & S. Stainback, 1991; H. Turnbull & A. Turnbull, 1990)

Yet, even in the race of this trend, there has been only a relatively slow and gradual emergence of new standards for special educators within their own professional association. As a result, the specific role of special educators has become dependent upon the interpretation of local general education administrators (Council for Exceptional Children, 1995; Wigle & Wilcox, 1996). With this development there has been an emergence of new roles for special educators. The professional literature seems to focus on the consultative and collaborative aspects of the "new" special educator (Dettmer, Dyck, & Thruston, 1999). The special education consultation now often performs many of the function previously thought to be the domain of the licensed special education administrator, e.g., problem-solving, delivering inservice programs, knowledge of special education law, case management, parent interaction, and record keeping (Kampwirth, 1999). Whether special education professionals are being prepared adequately for their new role is an important question (Wigle & Wilcox, 1995).

The authors of this study investigated the competencies of special educators on a set of 35 skills identified by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) as being important to professionals working in a leadership role in special education. The self-reported competencies are discussed in terms of their implication for special education programs and services for K-12 schools and in terms of their implications for the preparation of professional education personnel in institutions of higher education (IHE).

Method

A sample of 60 special educators were selected randomly from each of four states, i.e., Nebraska, Tennessee, Kansas, and Texas from the respective state school directories for a total sample size of 240 persons. Other self-reported materials were included in the packet, e.g. demographic information, a cover letter explaining the intent of the study, and an envelope stamped and addressed for easy return.

A survey was developed based upon the 35 skills identified by CEC. Each skill was used as an item to which the respondent was to indicate his/her level of competency by checking either (1) skilled, (2) adequate, or (3) inadequate. Each level of competency was further defined on the survey sheet. Forty-nine surveys were returned for a response rate of 20%.

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The data were sorted according to the demographic information included on the surveys. The number of responses at each level of competency for each CEC skill were counted and the percentage of responses at each level were computed. The fact that all of the data in this study were derived from individuals who chose to voluntarily participate and that the overall response rate from the target population was relatively low (20%), represents a selection bias. The threat to the external validity of a study that is posed by such a selection bias is well-documented (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). This study did not involve comparison between groups thus it was not possible to draw any causal conclusions from the data obtained. However, even given these limitations, the value of this study lies in the fact that it represents a sample of special educators across several states and that it offers some insight into various important competencies of professionals who have the potential to impact students with disabilities in significant ways (Wigle & Wilcox, 1999).

Results

The majority of the individuals in this study were both well educated and experienced. More than one-half held a Master's degree and have completed at least 11 years of teaching. The gender division was relatively uneven as 76% of the respondents were female.

An analysis of the data revealed four distinct groups of competencies. (See TABLE 1). One group, consisting of only two competencies, dealt with developing budgets and procuring funding. The respondents scored "skilled" only 10% and 16% respectively.

A second group was the largest number of skills (14). It involved creating professional development programs, using technology, developing new services and programs, and implementing a variety of administrative procedures. This group was the second overall lowest level with a range of 8% to 29% skilled, and a mean overall of 21.3%.

The third group involved 12 skills that included a variety of roles and responsibilities, specifically, to be able to develop discipline policies, programs of assessment, create inclusive settings, create and advocate for families of individuals with disabilities, and develop effective consultative and collaborative techniques. The respondents indicated the second highest level on individual skills ranging from 18% to 56%. The overall group mean of responses was 35.4% skill level of ability.

There were seven skills in the fourth group involving the ability to understand and interpret data and information, develop effective communications with parents and families, demonstrate high standards of ethical practice, and develop collaborative programs of education. This group was the highest level of perceived ability. The percentages of competencies raged from 43% to 71% with an overall group mean of 55% skilled.

Discussion

Special educators fill a wide range of very important roles in special education programs (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1991). As a result, if they are going to be effective leaders, they need to have an array of some very important skills. The data reported above suggest that the special educators in this study perceive themselves as having relatively high levels of competence in a broad range of skill areas identified as being important to professionals working in the area of special education leadership. However, the data also suggest that the special educators in this study often perceive themselves as lacking in some of these important skills.

Group 1 skills contained the lowest competency scores. This is not surprising given that developing budgets and interagency agreements are usually not part of the preservice preparation programs for special educators (Kampwirth, 1999). However, 18% of the respondents indicated their ability to develop budgets to be "adequate" and 20% more rated their ability at the "skilled" level. The ability to create interagency agreements was rated as "adequate" by 29% of the respondents and another 16% rated their ability as "skilled." Such relatively acceptable

scores could be explained by the fact that the nature of the duties of special educators require them to prepare budgets for their programs to ensure the proper educational program for each identified student. In addition, administrators expect the special educators to know where to find resources and agencies to provide needed services for students with disabilities.

Group 2 contained the second-to-lowest ratings on 14 skills. These competencies are indicative of changes and transitions that are taking place in the responsibilities of special educators. For example, 35% of the respondents rated themselves as skilled in the use of technology to facilitate the learning of student with disabilities. However, if technology is going to be able to fulfill its promise for students with disabilities, then preparation programs for preservice special educators and staff development programs for special educators who struggle with the application of classroom technology will both need to be improved (Cwiklik, 1997).

Other changes are also impacting special educators. For example, the competency areas in Group 2 call for leaders to be able to do things like creating professional development programs for their colleagues, to develop new student-service programs that do not presently exist in their schools, and to implement a variety of administrative procedures and initiatives that include things like strategic planning and setting a "vision." Almost 50% of the respondents of this study rated themselves on the skills in this group at least at the adequate level.

Group 3 was rated as the next-to-highest level of perceived ability for the special educators. The skills in this group represent a mixture of old and new roles and responsibilities and a continuum from the traditional to the transitional. For example, the assessment of students with disabilities is a relatively traditional job responsibility of special educators, as are the abilities to modify curricula and materials, adapt instructional approaches in order to meet the needs of a diverse array of students with disabilities, and develop instructional programs that are appropriate to the needs of the students being served (Olson & Platt, 1996).

Dealing with discipline and trying to promote positive behavior in students with disabilities represents a mixture of traditional job roles and new responsibilities, given the changes which relate to student behavior that have been implemented in IDEA (1997). Special educators will need ever greater skills and abilities in this area to make sure that students with disabilities who engage in disruptive behavior receive appropriate educational interventions (Voyles, 1997).

The emphasis on inclusive practices in P-12 schools, the ability to communicate and collaborate with administrators, general classroom teachers, and families of students with disabilities, and the ability to be an effective advocate of students, are relatively new factors in the roles and responsibilities of special educators (Cates & Yell, 1994; Wigle & Wilcox, 1997).

That the respondents indicated relatively high levels of competency in the Group 3 skills is an indication of the confidence they have in their ability to meet some of the new and challenging demands they face in special education. Inservice programs need to be provided for the special educators' transition to new roles and responsibilities as leaders in inclusionary settings.

Group 4 contains seven rather traditional roles and responsibilities of the special educator. The fact that Group 4 competencies are very familiar to special educators may explain the finding that the respondents in this study indicated the highest level of ability with an overall group mean of responses indicating the skilled level at 55% and only 5% rated this group mean at the inadequate level. The respondents perceived themselves as being skilled in understanding and interpreting data and information about students with disabilities, communicating with parents, developing collaborative educational programs, and demonstrating high standards of ethical practice. The competencies in Group 4 are important to the overall effectiveness of special educators. However, as the findings in this paper indicate, it may be necessary for programs that prepare and develop such professionals to spend relatively less time on these competencies and relatively more time on the newer, more transitional

competencies that have been identified by CEC as being important to professionals working in leadership roles in special education.

Conclusion

The implications of the study for the preparation of educational personnel are two. First, IHE preparation programs should continue to stress the relatively traditional skills of special educators. These skills are critical to the success of special education programs and these are skills that IHEs currently seem to be adept at helping special education personnel develop. Second, IHE preservice preparation programs and inservice staff developing programs need to improve the skills of special educators related to newer and more transitional competency areas.

That the special educators in this study indicated relatively high levels of competency in various important leadership roles is an indication of the appropriateness and efficacy of both preservice and inservice programs for these professional educators. The fact that the special educators in this study saw themselves as lacking some of these important leadership roles should be a real concern to all professionals who have responsibility for special education programs. Special educators play important leadership roles in providing services to students with disabilities. These educators must provide the leadership that will be needed to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are met adequately. To be able to do so, they will need to develop the same level of skill on transitional areas of competency that they presently see themselves as having on more traditional areas of competency. Absent such levels of competency, it will be relatively difficult for them to function as effective leaders in inclusionary settings. Such outcomes will lower the effectiveness of special education programs and result in serious consequences for the students served by those programs.

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TABLE 1 Respondents Ratings of Competencies

Group 1 1-Inadequate 2-Adequate 3-Skilled	1	2	3
19. Develop district budgets & procure funding from federal, state, and local sources to ensure the efficient & effective allocation of resources.	59*	18*	10*
15. Develop & implement interagency agreements that create system-linked programs with shared responsibility for students with exceptionalities.	47	29	15

Group 2 1-Inadequate 2-Adequate 3-Skilled	1	2	3
26. Develop parent/family education programs & other support groups	43	49	8
17. Develop & implement professional development programs for individuals, school site, & district personnel that include use of technology.	39	41	14
27. Implement conflict resolution programs and support consensus building.	39	45	12
22. Use a variety of technologies to enhance efficient management of district resources & programs.	35	45	20
10. Develop & implement a technology plan that provides a wide array of technology for use in direct services.	33	29	22
1. Develop & communicate an inclusive vision for meeting the needs of individuals with exceptionalities to the various publics/constituencies within the school, community and state.	20	49	29
25. Implement a variety of management & administrative procedures to ensure clear communication among administrators & between administrators.	20	67	22
28. Develop & support communication & collaboration with educational & other agency administrators.	20	55	25

Group 3 1-Inadequate 2-Adequate 3-Skilled	1	2	3
18. Develop & implement a district discipline policy & procedures for individuals with exceptionalities including procedures for IEP development	18	45	35
20. Develop building level supports that sustain inclusive educational settings.	18	37	41
24. Support individual school sites in implementing a range of strategies that promote positive behavior, including crisis intervention & family support & involvement.	18	57	24

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14. Develop & implement ongoing evaluations of district special education programs, & practices based on student learning.	18	49	18
3. Plan, communicate & negotiate student & family needs & Programs within the state, local district, including local schools & other public & private service agencies.	16	49	27
6. Implement an assessment program for individuals with Exceptionalities that is linked to the general system assessments, provides appropriate accommodations and/or valid alternative assessments & which will demonstrate learner progress toward educational goals.	16	20	57
11. Assist in development of district curriculum & instruction al models that provide appropriate experiences for all students, including individuals with exceptionalities.	14	43	31
4. Advocate for the inclusion of individuals with exceptionalities in the local, state accountability system.	14	47	33
32. Serve as the advocate for individuals with exceptionalities & their families at the district level.	12	50	31
5. Develop & implement programs that respond to individual Family characteristics, cultures, & needs within a continuum of services.	12	41	43
13. Support site-based decision making processes & ensure that decisions & management procedures provide appropriate services to individuals with exceptionalities.	10	49	37
31. Effective consultation & collaboration techniques & their application in management & instructional settings.	10	47	37

Group 4 1-Inadequate 2-Adequate 3-Skilled	1	2	3
6. Understand & interpret data/information about individual students & their families within a cultural context.	8	43	43
30. Develop & provide effective & ongoing communication with parents & families of individuals with exceptionalities	6	35	55
34. Communicate & demonstrate a high standard of ethical practice.	6	22	70
12. Develop collaborative general & special programs & other innovative approaches to ensure that individuals with exceptionalities have access to & appropriately participate in the general education curricula & instructional programs	6	33	55
33. Respect & support students' self-advocacy efforts.	4	47	47
29. Collaborate & engage in shared decision-making with building administrators to support appropriate programs for individuals with exceptionalities.	2	51	47
35. Make decision concerning individuals with exceptionalities based on communication, trust, mutual respect, & dignity.	2	27	71

*Percentages rounded to next higher whole number.

*Shaded areas highlight the adequate and skilled responses.